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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000662

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: DESPITE REFORM ROADMAP, QUESTIONS ON
DIRECTION AND SPEED OF DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS

REF: COLOMBO 445

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) Summary: On March 27 the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) unveiled its much-hyped "Reform Roadmap" which calls for increased press freedom, a new constitution by June 2007, and a multi-party election in October 2008. Since then, however, little progress has been made and constraints on the press have been heavier than ever. The opposition has conducted three protests over three weeks to highlight social injustice and the lack of political rights. While President Gayoom easily won leadership of the government's Dhivehi Rayyethunge Party (DRP- Maldivian people's Party) in its first party congress held April 19-21 in Male', four vice-presidency positions were hotly contested. While the publication of the Roadmap was a victory for the reformists, the DRP leadership competition highlighted deepening rifts in the party, and as yet, it is unclear whether the New Maldives can fully triumph over the old. End summary.

ROADMAP TO LEAD THE WAY?

12. (U) The Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) presented its highly publicized "Reform Roadmap" on March 27, committing to democratic reforms based on a two-year timeline. The document calls for a new constitution by June 2007 with a multi-party election by October 2008. The deadline for the election coincides with the end of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's current term, irritating the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) which wants an election some time in 2007. In addition to constitutional reform, the Roadmap includes a police powers act and a bill to codify the Human Rights Commission, as well as a new penal code to be introduced as a bill by August. The first two bills are now before parliament. The MDP, in typical fashion, responded to the GORM's proposals with skepticism; numerous interlocutors told poloff that with President Gayoom still in power, bills in parliament were not adequate to ensure civil liberties.

13. (C) In an April 24 phone conversation with poloff, Ibrahim Mohamed Didi, an MDP Member of Parliament (MP) serving on the parliamentary committee to discuss the Human Rights Commission bill, said the bill is facing amendments in

committee but will stay within UN guidelines. He expects the bill to go to the full floor of parliament for debate and a vote when parliament resumes in June after a month's recess. Didi said the MDP has introduced a freedom of assembly bill, to be discussed in parliament April 25, and that the government's police powers act will be discussed April 26, just before the recess is due to begin.

PRESS FREEDOM UNDER FIRE

14. (SBU) Although the Roadmap also promised media reform, journalists continue to face harassment and prosecution. On April 19, Fahala Saeed, a reporter for Minivan News, the only pro-opposition daily, was sentenced to life in prison for possession of heroin with the intent to sell. Saeed is adamant that the drugs were planted on him when he was summoned to the police station on October 13 for "investigation." According to a Minivan reporter who attended Saeed's trial, state witnesses testified that the packets found contained 1.1 grams of heroin in the form of brown sugar. (Note: In Maldives possession of over 1 gram is considered prima facie intent to sell. End note.) Saeed was not permitted to testify on his own behalf, and he was barred from calling two witnesses in his defense.

15. (SBU) On April 18, Minivan's sub-editor Nazim Sattar was summoned to court for an article he published in August 2005 and charged with disobedience to order. The article quoted someone as saying that abusive police officers must be found and made to feel that violence is painful. The state's case is that the article constitutes incitement. The disobedience

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to order charge can carry a fine of approximately 20 USD or up to six months in jail. Minivan staff have told us that Sattar is the de-facto editor of the paper, and his absence could undermine the paper's ability to continue publication. Other Minivan journalists have reported police harassment, and one correspondent is being held in prison although his family and colleagues have not been advised of the charges against him.

PERIODIC PROTESTS

16. (SBU) In addition to press freedom concerns, the opposition has also highlighted worries about the treatment of women. In March, MDP MP Mariya Didi told poloff she, along with other women in the opposition, has faced police harassment and been slandered in pro-government websites. Websites have featured photographs and derogatory articles about other female reform activists such as Minivan Radio journalist Fathimath Shaheeda and occasional Minivan website correspondent Sabra Nordeen. Didi organized a protest against gender-based harassment in Male' on March 30. In the lead-up to the protest, the women who were meeting to plan for it were pelted with engine oil in a public park. Nevertheless, the day of the protest itself was peaceful.

17. (SBU) In contrast, a protest on April 14 saw reports of street violence and police heavy-handedness. The demonstration, held to protest economically restrictive fishing policies and the appointment of unelected members of parliament (an opposition pet peeve), was broken up by police. An opposition MP was reportedly beaten and kicked with reinforced boots during his arrest; he was later released from police custody and sought medical attention. People in the crowd threw stones and eyewitnesses reported fisticuffs. MDP Deputy Secretary General Aishath Aniya was arrested at the demonstration and remained in detention for nine days.

18. (SBU) According to Minivan website's correspondent, the

MDP, in order to avoid violating political party regulations limiting demonstrations, asked a newspaper editor to organize an April 21 protest. The demonstration, ostensibly addressing high rent costs, nevertheless ended in the arrest of the organizer and several participants. An NGO representative working with the MDP to strengthen its internal democracy told poloff from Male' that the local mood is somewhat bleak, and many are frustrated with the arrests. However, he noted, high profile opposition members arrested at the protests, including Aniya, were all released April 23.

NEW MALDIVES V. OLD

¶9. (C) Commenting from Male' on the protests during an April 18 phone conversation with poloff, Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed said he disagreed with hard-line Home Minister Thasmeen's heavy-handed approach. Shaheed said Thasmeen was notably left out of the "New Maldives Caucus," a group of eleven reform-minded DRP members who were collaborating before the DRP congress, held in Male' April 19-21. The group set up a website and campaigned as a unit within the DRP to elect its members to party leadership positions. Shaheed said he and other progressives would continue to work toward reform "even if we are reduced to becoming a pressure group or we have to resign our cabinet positions." Noting his involvement with a new NGO seeking to promote liberal democratic values, Shaheed said he might pursue his reform goals through civil society rather than government service in future. He expressed hope that the New Maldives group could wrest power from the old guard in the party.

¶10. (SBU) Shaheed initially contested but then withdrew his candidacy for a DRP vice presidency position at the DRP Congress. Two members of the New Maldives Caucus, Attorney General Hassan Saeed and Finance Minister (and MDP defector) Gasim Ibrahim won places, as did hard-line Home Minister Thasneem and moderate Ahmed Syam Mohammed also won a place. President Gayoom easily won the party Presidency; his only

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competitor was barred from attending the Congress. On April 22, Saeed and Shaheed called Minivan website's correspondent and offered a candid interview, which ran in the website April 23, discussing rifts within the DRP and assessing that Saeed's election as a DRP vice president was a mandate for "more aggressive reform." They also said President Gayoom is fully supportive of speedy democratization, and hard-line MPs with a majority in parliament would be the only ones who might slow down the process.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) The Roadmap's publication stakes the government's credibility on its ability to deliver time-bound reform. While the ambitious document provides a strong framework for democratization, the apparent attacks on press freedom would call the government's sincerity into question. While the GORM's subsequent actions have not been entirely consistent with Roadmap's rhetoric, the MDP, for its part, has merely criticized the document without proposing any alternatives. Shaheed and Saeed's decision to offer an interview to an English language, pro-opposition website, the editor of which is a British citizen blacklisted from Maldives, indicates their strong desire to convey their liberal position to the press and to the public. The two have clearly drawn battle-lines against the hard-liners in their own party. It remains to be seen whether New Maldives, with two of its members now DRP vice presidents claiming a mandate from the party electorate, can fully push forward the reform agenda. End comment.
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